

TEN ESSENTIAL AUDIT QUESTIONS

1. How do you contribute to achieving your organization's objectives?

ISO 9001:2000 requires that organizations establish measurable objectives at relevant functions and levels. Personnel must understand how they contribute to these objectives and be able to communicate how they help move objectives in the right direction. This question directly reflects an organization's ability to communicate what matters most to its success. To comprehend objectives, people must understand specifically what they can do to improve the organization. They appreciate the significance of their roles and are prepared to carry them out.

2. What happens if your product, materials, or supplies are nonconforming? This question reflects the organization's ability to deal with product problems in a systematic way. Controlling nonconforming products is a basic discipline that smart auditors always probe, and it applies to services as well as tangible goods. The answer to this question can be compared to the documented procedure and to the auditor's observations. There's no room for deviation. Problems relating to controlling nonconforming products almost always pose significant risks to the organization in added costs, wasted time,

aggravated employees, angry customers, and loss of competitive position.

3. How do you access product requirements? Everyone has a product of some sort. It might go to an external customer or simply to the next process inside the organization. In all cases, personnel must understand the product requirements. ISO 9001:2000 requires that organizations identify product requirements in four ways: as stated by the customer, as unstated by the customer but necessary for intended use, as statutory and legal regulations related to the product, and as any additional requirements determined by the organization. The standard also requires that information describing the product be available (i.e., documented). Employees don't need to know product requirements by heart, but they should be able to find the current versions of them and describe how they carry them out.

4. How are problems prevented? Problem correction is relatively simple. Problem prevention, however, is more complex. ISO 9001:2000 requires preventive action and provides one of the most valuable links to continual improvement. The most obvious way to generate preventive action is by analyzing data. Data analysis is a primary job of top management, but it can hap-

pen at other levels of the organization. When an organization openly shares data and encourages its analysis on a broad scale, then preventive action becomes easy. Employee creativity and innovation can also be a valuable starting point for preventive action. Another source of preventive action is feedback from customers.

5. How do you use data on customer perceptions? This question is especially relevant to top management and employees responsible for gauging customer perceptions. ISO 9001:2000 requires that organizations define methods for obtaining and using customer satisfaction data. Rely on simple methods for capturing customer perceptions: The more complex and resource-intensive your customer satisfaction methods are, the less likely you'll take action on what you learn. Many organizations run out of gas before they get to the action phase, and valuable customer feedback is ignored as other problems arise.

6. How are customer complaints handled? Despite everyone's best efforts, customers occasionally complain. Customer complaints represent both a huge risk and a valuable opportunity to the organization depending on how they're handled. This question is espe-

within a given horizontal system. However, it may be unnecessary to use 8D and Six Sigma with PDCA because they all serve the same purpose. 5S may be used with one of these systems because its purpose is different. If the horizontal system is based on ISO 9001:1994, 5S can be linked with the sections that deal with clean environment (process control), identification of materials (product identification and traceability as well as inspection and test status), and storage of

the material (handling, packing, packaging, storage, and preservation).

Conclusion

With appreciation for the concept of horizontal and vertical systems, the superfluity of quality tools and techniques collapses into two simple categories. The task of quality management is then simplified to mere selection of a couple of tools from the

cially relevant to salespeople, customer service representatives, technical personnel, and top management. The auditor is looking for proof of a systematic approach to dealing with complaints. This typically includes defined responsibilities for logging and tracking complaints, clear problem statements with all relevant facts, determination of problem causes, and actions that address the causes.

7. How does top management review the organization's performance? ISO 9001:2000 requires management review with defined inputs and outputs. There's no sense in conducting an ISO 9001 management review then conducting a separate review of the organization's performance; they should be the same review. Some of the best approaches to reviewing organizational performance are the most creative. Many organizations design their reviews across a number of different forums and time frames, which is practical and realistic. The three imperatives include data analysis, identifying opportunities, and taking action on them. Smart organizations treat these activities as inseparable.

8. What evidence can you provide of continual improvement? This question can be asked of everyone in the

organization. In organizations that have developed improvement tools and provided opportunities for their application, this is an easy question. In organizations where improvement efforts are narrowly applied, it becomes a much harder question. There should be some evidence of continual improvement within the scope of the audit. All improvements have value. This question summarizes many of the earlier questions. The ultimate purpose of a management system is to provide a means for improvement. Just because one or two people aren't able to provide evidence of improvement isn't necessarily a problem. It could indicate weak improvement efforts, though, and further investigation would be warranted.

9. How are training needs determined? This might seem like a strange question on a list of most important audit questions, but it's significant. Developing human resources is one of the keys to organizational success. This question attempts to probe the degree of planning that goes into developing these resources. Is training performed as a knee-jerk activity without any underlying objectives or is it geared toward empowering each employee with the skills and knowledge needed to propel the organization forward?

During the audit, be sure to probe the training needs that have been determined for all levels of personnel.

10. What's the most important thing about your job? This is an exploratory question aimed at assessing how much planning went into developing the management system. Compare the answer to the controls in place to determine how deliberately the management system was implemented. If you learn that the most important thing about the job is receiving timely and complete feedback from the downstream department, then it will be revealing to explore if the feedback exists and what's done with it. This question requires a lot of skill because the information may or may not lead to logical conclusions. The auditor must know when an issue is worth exploring in detail. Don't allow this question to become an endless fishing expedition. Explore the important elements of a job, compare what you learn against current controls, and crosscheck the facts with other personnel doing similar jobs.

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horizontal category and then a couple from the vertical systems category.

Organizations need both horizontal and vertical systems because they serve different and complementary functions. It is important to integrate the two kinds of systems so that the horizontal systems are continually improved by means of vertical systems and the improvements are sustained by means of horizontal systems. In absence of both horizontal and vertical

systems functioning in a synchronous manner, quality will be elusive. ❖

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